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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PM](#)
SUBJECT: PANAMA: PRD POSTPONES INTERNAL ELECTIONS

Classified By: AMBASSADOR WILLIAM A. EATON. REASON: 1.4 (D)

Summary

¶11. (C) The Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD) would postpone its internal elections until January 2008 and its presidential primary until October 2008, Panamanian First VP and FM Samuel Lewis told the Ambassador on March 6. Lewis asserted that this postponement would allow President Martin Torrijos' administration to get important work done before entering campaign mode. Clearly, Lewis is the biggest beneficiary of this postponement, a fact that was not lost on leading PRD "pre-candidates" former President Ernesto "El Toro" Perez Balladares and current Panama City Mayor Juan Carlos Navarro. Lewis remains Torrijos preferred successor, as most recently evidenced by First Lady Vivian de Torrijos characterization that Lewis would be a "fabulous" presidential candidate. By delaying PRD's political schedule, Torrijos has bought Lewis time and political space to improve his standing and to get his polling numbers out of the basement. While Perez Balladares blasted the decision as an example of Torrijos "undemocratic" management of the PRD, Navarro chose instead to laud Torrijos' leadership and to question Perez Balladares' standing to make such criticisms. While his efforts to secure the PRD's presidential nomination are also complicated by this development, Navarro already has strong poll numbers, needs Torrijos to block Perez Balladares, and hopes ultimately to win over Torrijos and secure his endorsement. End summary.

Torrijos to Postpone PRD's Internal Elections

¶12. (C) "We will start our internal election process in January 2008," Panamanian First VP and FM Samuel Lewis told the Ambassador on March 6, referring to the calendar to elect new leaders for the governing Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD). The PRD primaries for the May 2008 elections, Lewis added, would be held in October 2008. (Note: As Secretary General of the PRD, President Torrijos controls the PRD's machinery, sets its agenda, and determines its schedule.) "Those PRD members who are inside the government understand that we have a lot of tough, and at times unpopular, decisions to make and implement. We have a lot of things to get done before we go into campaign mode." Those PRD members who were outside the Administration (most pointedly meaning, without mentioning, Perez Balladares) instead wished to move up schedule of internal party elections so as to open the PRD's campaign season, Lewis explained.

El Toro Blasts "PRD leadership's dictatorial methods"

¶3. (U) The current leadership of the PRD (read: Torrijos), is not managing the party in a democratic fashion, Perez Balladares blasted in March 8 radio interviews. For example in one interview, he stated, "We (the PRD) are going back to the days following the death of General Torrijos, days in which there was a lack of internal (party) democracy, we heeded the pointed finger, we followed of the party line." Perez Balladares added that he did not care who ran against him for the Presidency of the PRD National Executive Committee (CEN), whether it was Panama City Mayor Juan Carlos Navarro or Minister of Housing Balbina Herrera. Asked about Panamanian First Lady Vivian de Torrijos' comment in an interview published March 3 in La Prensa that Lewis would make a "fabulous" presidential candidate, Perez Balladares dismissively commented, "Fabulous comes from the word fable, and, for me, a fable is a story, a candidate from a dream."

Navarro Takes Swipe at El Toro

¶4. (U) Perez Balladares was in no position to question Torrijos' management of the PRD, Navarro said in separate radio interviews. "Torrijos has managed the PRD with humility, generosity and democracy," Navarro said. Also a declared candidate for the presidency of the PRD CEN, Navarro stated, "I think that Perez Balladares' statements are best understood in the context of his political campaign to attempt to return to the leadership of the PRD."

Comment

¶4. (C) Lewis, who rarely discusses internal PRD politics, was giddy with the news that the PRD's internal elections and subsequent primary would be postponed and could not hold back from sharing the news with the Ambassador. While he is likely to remain at the MFA in the near-term, Lewis -- whose poll numbers are abysmal -- will need to step down at some point to start the kind of hard political work with the PRD's bases in which Perez Balladares and Navarro have been engaged for several months. Herrera is Torrijos' candidate to be president of the PRD and to be the next mayor of Panama City, something that incumbent Navarro also actively promotes. By putting Herrera forward as his candidate for PRD president, Torrijos hopes to knock Perez Balladares off his stride and remove one obstacle in Lewis' path to succeed Torrijos. Denied the PRD presidency, Perez Balladares would need to consider seriously leaving the PRD to run as a maverick presidential candidate, something difficult for any life-long PRD member to contemplate and even more difficult to sell to PRD rank and file, a skeptical opposition, and the majority of Panamanians that are not members of any party. Navarro will have additional time to try to win over Torrijos. To date, we have seen no indication, contrary to Navarro's assertions, that Navarro will be Torrijos' preferred candidate. The First Lady's interview underscored Torrijos preference for Lewis.

Eaton